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ABSTRACT

An outline of remarks made at a National Seminar on Equity and Educational Testing and Assessment in March of 1993 is provided. Issues of equity in education and educational assessment are discussed in the context of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The NAEP is a national test in the sense that it monitors what is happening in the nation, but it is not a national examination for individual students in the sense that the term has been used in recent discussions. There continues to be considerable debate about the proper role for the NAEP. The National Council on Education Standards and Testing has suggested that the present NAEP functions well as a measurement of and report on trends, and should be kept separate from a new national system of examinations. The NAEP has been sensitive to equity issues and eliminating bias in assessment. As the NAEP moves into the area of performance assessment, new equity issues are emerging. Some recent examples of differences in performance by racial groups are highlighted. For the NAEP to be the diagnostic tool it is meant to be, the Federal Government needs to improve the capability of its assessment data, and educators must make sure that teachers and principals receive the training they need to use NAEP information effectively. (SLD)

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Outline of Remarks of Emerson J. Elliott
March 12, 1993
Equity and Educational Testing and Assessment
A National Seminar
National Testing and Assessment Strategies: Equity Implications of Leading Proposals for National Examinations

I. NAEP in History and in an Era of Standards

Over the course of this seminar, we have all learned much about equity issues and assessment. I have been asked to discuss these issues in relation to national testing and I will concentrate my remarks on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) which the National Center for Educations Statistics (NCES) administers.

I'll begin with a denial. NAEP is a national test in that it monitors what is happening; it is not a national examination for individual students in the sense that term has been used by this panel. NAEP is the only ongoing, consistent, and representative measure of what students know and can do, subject by subject. It has been in place for more than two decades and it has special value in its ability to assess trends in learning.

Many people have liked NAEP because it didn't report by state or school district in a way that could hold any specific person accountable--so not much attention needed to be given to the results. In 1988, Congress authorized a pilot test at the state level on a voluntary basis, so now NAEP is more difficult to ignore. For states, it has become a "high stakes" test.

Recent years have witnessed an explosion of interest in assessment as both an instrument of reform and a way to measure reform. With establishment of the National Education Goals by the President and Nation's Governors, the need to seek agreement on what is to be taught to reach these Goals, the need to measure progress toward the Goals, and the increased interest of schools and States in

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accountability, as well as informing instructional practices, national testing has been seen as a critical intervention.

The National Assessment continues to be prodded into more forms as these national trends unfold and as technology permits. There has been considerable debate about the proper role for NAEP as the Nation moves forward in the area of curriculum frameworks and content standards.

- For example, the new NAEP mathematics assessments are based on NCTM standards, and NAEP frameworks for reading assessment-like their counterparts in growing numbers of states-increasingly require students to demonstrate comprehension and analysis of more challenging texts. Also, the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB), NAEP's policymaking body, has developed achievement level standards describing what students should do to reach "basic," "proficient," or "advanced" performance levels.

The report from the National Council on Education Standards and Testing recommended the development of a system of assessments for individual students consistent with national standards and the development of a national system/ monitor consistent with national standards, i.e., NAEP. The Council report stated that NAEP functions well as an independent mechanism to monitor national and state progress towards the National Education Goals, particularly Goal #3.

The rationale here is that NAEP should be kept seperate from a new national system of examinations in order to preserve its ability to provide trend information on future national standards. In so doing, NAEP would be reinforced for what it does best; that is to measure and report on trends, but with growing emphasis on following national standards.

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II. NAEP and Equity Issues

From its inception, NAEP has been extremely sensitive to issues of equity and eliminating bias in its assessments. The Educational Testing Service, NCES's primary contractor for NAEP, has an elaborate procedure for examining every item used in a test to ensure that it meets professional standards for quality and fairness. In addition, NAGB has statutory authority to "ensure that all items selected for use in the National Assessment are free from racial, cultural, gender, or regional bias."

As it moves into the arena of large scale performance assessments, new equity issues are emerging for NAEP. Theoretically, performance assessment could lead to a narrowing of the gap for those who have traditionally scored lower on multiple choice tests because the new form of assessment can measure abilities in a variety of ways. However, as the limited research we have on this issue informs us, these assessments in practice show wider differences between groups of students from different backgrounds than traditional multiple choice tests.

I want to draw your attention to a few NAEP findings where there are group differences on performance assessments.

- The first is from the 1988 NAEP Report Card on the writing performance of American students. To evaluate their abilities, NAEP asked nationally representative samples of fourth, eighth, and twelfth grade students to perform a variety of writing tasks. In addition, to study aspects of the assessment context that could influence student performance, NAEP conducted a special study to explore the effects of increased response times on students' writing achievement.

- In addition to permitting comparison of the overall differences in performance according to the length of response time provided, the results of the special study also

were used to identify groups of students who benefited most from having additional time to write.

- NAEP found the following:

  1) when given twice the usual amount of response time, White students improved on four of the five tasks.

  2) Black and Hispanic students appeared to benefit less consistently from additional writing time, as they improved significantly on only one of the five tasks. (It is interesting to note that the 1992 writing assessment response times were increased due to these findings.)

This information leads me to pose a question: what is there in the instructional experiences of minority and majority children that could account for such differences?

- A second example that I would like to cite relates to findings in the 1992 mathematics assessment. In the 1992 mathematics assessment, NAEP used three different types of response items: multiple choice, short constructed response, and extended constructed response. We found performance differences among racial ethnic groups:

  1) There appears to be a somewhat larger gap between correct responses of our White and Asian students and those of Black and Hispanic for short constructed response questions than for multiple choice.

  2) For the extended response items, no sub-group does very well. However, in proportion to Whites and Asians, the Black and Hispanic student gap is much greater than for multiple choice items.

Current NAEP data on the proficiency of eighth grade students by algebra course taking shows that:

1) Fewer Blacks (13%) and Hispanics (12%) are taking algebra at grade 8 as compared to Whites (22%) and Asians (42%).

2) Blacks and Hispanics who take algebra perform better than their counterparts who take other 8th grade math courses.

Over the years, NAEP data have illustrated three conditions and trends: 1) there has been an extremely large gap in performance for minorities; 2) the gap has been narrowed; and 3) there have been significant improvements at the lower performing levels. Here are a few examples to illustrate these points:

- In 1990, for reading at age 17, the average proficiency of Whites was 29 points higher than that of Blacks. This differential is down from a 53 point gap in 1971.

- In 1990, for math at age 13, the average proficiency of Hispanics was 22 points lower than that of Whites. This differential is down from a 35 point gap in 1973.

- In 1978, 86% of Hispanics at age 13 performed at the 200 proficiency level of the NAEP mathematics scale. In 1990, 97% performed at the 200 level. At the 300 proficiency level, the performance increased from 4 to 6%.

- In 1975, 82% of Blacks at age 17 scored at the 200 proficiency level of the NAEP reading scale. In 1990, 96% performed at the 200 level. At the 300 proficiency level, the performance increased from 8% to 20%.

If not for NAEP, we would not have these empirical data for tracking the progress of students across time in different racial/ethnic groups. NAEP data can be used as one of many diagnostic tools in enriching learning and understanding student progress. For this to work well, two things are required: 1) the Federal government needs to improve the capability of its assessment data so that more analysis can be done with it in relating performance to instruction; and 2) educators must be increasingly involved with assessment at the state and local levels and they must provide teachers and principals the training they need to use this information effectively.